

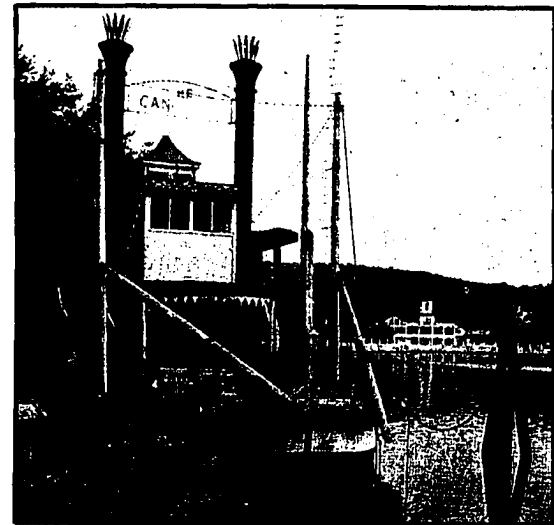
A visitor to Johnsonville sits for a spell.

Steve Silk / The Hartford Courant

Johnsonville



Items in the Creamer General Store.



A riverboat in Johnsonville.

Visit to Johnsonville A Step Back in Time

By **PAULA AUCLAIR**
Courant Correspondent

EAST HADDAM — High-button shoes and sleigh bells, tins of Snow Flake Axle Grease and Dr. Hess's Louse Killer, bins of tea and crackers, soap and chewing tobacco clutter the shelves.

Old-timers traded gossip and tall tales here, huddled up to the potbelly stove.

The Creamer General Store, built in 1845 and moved to Johnsonville several years ago, doesn't have any customers now, but from time to time its owners open it and 14 historic buildings for fund-raising or

non-profit activities.

Last month, it was opened for one such event, a tour sponsored by the Goodspeed Opera House Guild. More than 1,000 curious visitors inspected the grounds and Victorian memorabilia, netting the guild about \$2,800, treasurer Margaret K. Silberstein said.

"I hate to tell you," said Vera Nordberg of East Hartford, one of the visitors. She shook her head as she examined the

See Visitors, Page E4

Visitors to Johnsonville Discover Victorian Era

Continued from Page E1

crowded shelves. "This stuff looks very familiar. My kids think I come from the 18th century when I talk about places like this."

Her kids would be about a century too early. The general store and the post office and barber shop it houses, are decidedly 19th century. The penny postcards resting in the glass-front boxes of the post office are postmarked 1887. The mannequin waiting his turn in the barber chair reads the June 1872 issue of "Harpers New Monthly."

Like many of the other visitors, Vera and Harry Nordberg came to the privately owned historic village in the Moodus section to take advantage of the rare opportunity to tour it, they said. The guild's tour guides were repeatedly asked when Johnsonville would be open again, and replied: "This is the only time this year."

The owners of the 100-acre village, Carole and Raymond Schmitt, began the project as a hobby and an attempt to preserve a piece of the past about 17 years ago when they bought the Neptune Twine and Cord Mills from the descendants of E. Emory Johnson, who established the business in 1862.

The Johnsons are portrayed in the Rathbun Memorial Free Library's file on the mill as a compassionate family that provided housing and other benefits, including a 3,000-volume library, for their employees — mostly

Polish and Irish immigrants — through the Civil War and the Great Depression.

The four-story mill on the banks of the Moodus River manufactured hard-twist cotton twine until 1972 when it was struck by lightning and burned to the ground. The mill office, dam and waterwheel, as well as a sawmill moved from Hadlyme, are part of the tour.

The livery stable and carriage house, built in 1850 and moved from Winsted, houses nine horses and the Schmitts' collection of coaches, wagons and carriages.

Other buildings displayed for the tour include a one-room schoolhouse built in 1863 and moved from Canterbury, an ice house and the Gilead Chapel. The chapel is still used occasionally for weddings by special arrangement with the Schmitts.

One of Johnsonville's showpieces is the 1845 Johnson family home. It features gingerbread woodwork, shadow-box pictures, laminated rosewood furniture, Dresden china, French bisque figurines and a Regina phonograph equipped with a copper record that plays John Philip Sousa's "El Capitan March."

Like many old houses, it probably has a ghost, said Silberstein.

"There is a certain light that someone or something keeps turning off and a plug that is always unplugged and placed neatly on the table. It's unexplainable," she said.